[Image description: Colorful paper hands reaching for a gray paper cutout of a house.]

Intersections of Homelessness and Disability among K12 Students

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[Image description: Masculine-presenting Black child on black chalkboard background, with a light bulb and question marks.]

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There are a range of policies and systems to support learners who benefit from specialized or supplemental services and supports to promote their educational access and participation. Two groups for whom there has long been concern for the educational challenges associated with lack of access are disabled students and those who experience housing insecurity.

KEY TERMS

Food insecurity: "…the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways" (U.S. Department of Agriculture, What is Food Security? section, 2022).

Housing insecurity: This is a general term that encompasses inaccessibility or unaffordability (e.g., difficulty paying rent or utilities), safety, quality, insecurity, and loss of housing (eviction), and includes various types of homelessness, including the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) definition of four types of homelessness: (1) literally homeless; (2) imminent risk of homelessness (e.g., facing legal eviction within 14 days), (3) homeless under other federal statutes (e.g., the Runaway & Homeless Youth Act), or (4) fleeing/ attempting to flee domestic violence; as well as the McKinney-Vento definition of student homelessness as lacking "a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence" including living in temporary shared housing due to loss of housing or lack of funds, or emergency or transitional shelters, motels, campgrounds, trailer parks, vehicles, public spaces or abandoned buildings and other places not designed for "regular sleeping accommodations," and migratory children (42 U.S.C. § 11434a[2]).

Ensuring all eligible students are provided with full educational access and effective supports is critical to strengthen their safety, wellbeing, and development. Federal laws—along with resulting state and local policies, programs, and services—provide for programming and resources to support disabled and homeless students, respectively, but efforts can be siloed. This can be especially problematic for the many individuals who experience both disability and housing insecurity. This *Equity by Design* brief summarizes the policy, research, and applied dimensions of the intersections of student disability and homelessness.
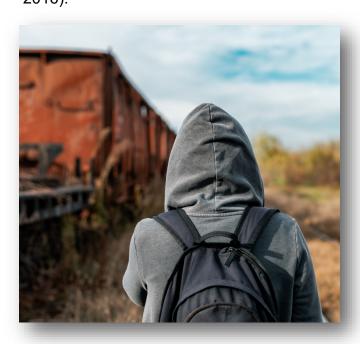
Educational Policy Context for Educational Supports for Homeless Youth with Disabilities

Multiple federal policies provide rights and programs for P12 students who experience homelessness or disability. These policies also stipulate participating school systems' obligations to students.

McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act is the primary federal legislation addressing student homelessness, most recently reauthorized in 2015 as part of the Every Student Succeeds Act (42 U.S.C. § 11431 et seq., 2015) to ensure homeless students' access to free, appropriate public education and reduce the detrimental effects of school mobility. McKinney-Vento

guarantees educational access to eligible students, including providing for their rights to (a) immediate school enrollment even when lacking required documentation, (b) participation in all school activities even when lacking uniforms or supplies, and (c) continued enrollment and transportation after moving to a new location in order to support school stability. McKinney-Vento also addresses privacy protections, due process, and transition supports to prepare homeless students for postsecondary education, and prohibits segregation of homeless students for delivery of services (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2016).

[Image description: Rear view of a youth in a backpack and hoodie, near train tracks.]

McKinney-Vento requires local education agencies to appoint a local liaison to oversee implementation of homelessness education stipulations of the Act, including coordination with other homeless assistance programs and review of policies or procedures that might inhibit homeless students' identification, enrollment, attendance, and success, including fees/

fines and absences (USDOE, 2016). The local liaison's role includes providing referrals for healthcare and housing services and ensuring students' access to related services and other programming for which they are eligible, including special education. This may include providing expedited evaluations to establish eligibility and prevent lags in needed services. Local liaisons can also certify homeless youths' eligibility for free school lunches based on the date of homelessness to streamline nutritional access in public schools that participate in the federal school meals program (National Center for Homeless Education [NCHE], 2022a), which is important given that food insecurity is a common challenge for individuals who experience housing insecurity.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

For individuals with disabilities, eligibility for and rights to specialized educational services and supports are delineated under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA; 20 U.S.C. § 1400 et seq., 2004) and Section 504 of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA; 2 U.S.C. § 12101 et seq.,1990; see also Sullivan et al., 2019 for more information). Most students with disabilities are served under IDEA, which includes a range of rights and due process protections related to students' right to free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment following an individualized education program (IEP) based on a student's needs. Although IDEA prohibits eligibility if students' difficulties are determined by the IEP team to be due to lack of instruction or disadvantage, this does not negate states' and districts' obligations to meet

child find[1] and comprehensive multidisciplinary evaluation requirements for homeless youth (National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, 2017).

Under IDEA, for students experiencing school mobility (i.e., changing schools), IDEA requires that new schools complete in-progress evaluations and provide continued appropriate individualized supports, which can be important for housing-insecure students unable to remain in their original school. For disabled students who become homeless, McKinney-Vento assumes the best interest of the student is to stay in the original school, so transportation and other supports should be provided to promote school stability (USDOE, 2016). When students with disabilities do change schools, the new school should provide comparable services to those identified in a student's IEP until a new IEP is adopted (NCHE, 2022b).

Limitations of Federal Policy

Taken together, these laws (i.e., McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, IDEA, Section 504 of the Americans with Disabilities Act) should increase access, participation, and outcomes of eligible youth. Unfortunately, their actual reach appears limited by factors such as: lack of adequate housing and disability screening; incomplete educational records; delayed evaluations; insufficient supports for absences related to lack of safe and stable housing; discontinuity in services between schools; educators' confusion about students' eligibility for related services that limit educators' provision of the protections and programming stipulated in the policies (Sullivan-Walker et al., 2017); insufficient federal and state funding and oversight (DiPerro & Mitchell, 2022); and limited preparation of local liaisons and other professionals to fully implement the requirements of the statutes, leading to under-identification and lack of support educational opportunity (Ingram et al., 2017). With greater understanding of the intersections of homelessness and disability, and associated local policy, procedures, and practice, schools can support improved access, opportunity, and outcomes for affected youth.

What Does Research Suggest about the Intersections of Homelessness and Disability among K12 Students?

Social Context of Housing Insecurity

Housing insecurity is associated with a range of systemic, social, and interpersonal factors, including sociopolitical contexts contributing to poverty and inadequate housing, healthcare, employment, transportation, or other social and economic supports. Systemic racism, colonialism, and ableism also contribute as individuals with disabilities, or who come from Indigenous or racially minoritized backgrounds, are more likely to be subjected to employment and housing discrimination, lack of healthcare access, and restricted educational opportunities (Manuel, 2018; Turner et al., 2016; Zhang & Johnson, 2023), each of which increases

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[1]Under IDEA, "school districts have an affirmative duty to locate, evaluate and potentially serve any infant, toddler or school-aged student impacted by disability" (PAVE, n.d., A Brief Overview section).

risk of homelessness (Fowle, 2022). Indeed, this social context of compounded marginalization contributes to a bidirectional relationship between housing insecurity and disability: individuals who are disabled are more likely to experience housing insecurity, and housing insecurity increases risk of disability. Some scholars note that the costs of disability—that is the expenses and losses to income associated with restricted opportunity and inaccessible services— can contribute to housing insecurity (Parish et al., 2008), just as other forms of systemic marginalization (e.g., exposure to housing discrimination, foster care, family incarceration) are more prevalent among homeless, racially minoritized youth (DiGuiseppi et al., 2022).

Nationally, rates of homelessness are increasing, with larger increases for families with children and unaccompanied youth (HUD Office of Policy Development & Research, 2023), which means that schools should be prepared to support larger numbers of homeless youth. In addition, other populations made especially vulnerable to homelessness are Indigenous and LGBTQ+ youth, and youth involved in the foster care and juvenile justice systems (National Conference of State Legislatures [NCSL], 2023).

Student Homelessness Identification Under Federal Education Programs

Estimates on the prevalence of homelessness among P12 students vary, but approximately 1.2 million students, or more than 2.4% of students, are identified as homeless under McKinney-Vento (National Center for Homeless Education [NCHE], 2024). Of those, 20% are also identified under IDEA, compared with 15% of the general population (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). Indigenous, racially minoritized students, and emergent multilingual learners are also overrepresented among homeless students (NHCE, 2024) given the systemic drivers of housing insecurity.

[Image description: Home filled with clothing and other household items.]

Most homeless youth identified under McKinney-Vento temporarily live with others (76%), often termed "doubling up," as opposed to shelters (11%), motels (9%), or other temporary options (NHCE, 2024) and approximately 9% are unaccompanied by adults (NHCE, 2023). Other research suggests most of these youth experience multiple episodes of homelessness and have had to sleep in non-residential and public places (e.g., cars, parks, abandoned buildings; Ingram et al., 2017). In addition, a Minnesota study found that McKinney-Vento identification may miss about 9% of homeless youth who are only identified through Housing and Urban Development (HUD) data for youth involved in emergency

shelter, transitional housing, or street outreach, but not through their schools (Lowell et al., 2020).

Both programs are likely missing an unknown number of eligible children and youth, potentially due to stigma, lack of knowledge about rights and programs, and delays or limited availability of staff, resources, and providers (e.g., DiPerro & Mitchell, 2022). Importantly, many formerly homeless youth report multiple episodes of homelessness and staying in multiple arrangements, both with and without their families (Ingram et al., 2017), suggesting the importance of ongoing efforts to identify and support homeless youth. Further, unaccompanied minors are at particular risk of trafficking and criminalization of survival behaviors (e.g., sleeping in public places; NCSL, 2023), making supportive services especially crucial for these youth.

Educational Needs and Outcomes of Homeless Youth

Most homeless youth report lack of stable housing harmed their health, mental wellbeing, education, family relationships, and peer relationships (Ingram et al., 2017). Homeless youth report needing tangible supports like transportation, school supplies, and tutoring; and emotional supports like feeling safe and supported in schools, and having social connections (Ingram et al., 2017). Yet, research suggests the majority of formerly homeless students felt their schools did not do a good job of supporting them, and over 40% had to stop attending middle or secondary school; meanwhile, many McKinney-Vento liaisons report being ill-prepared to support required programming for homeless students (Ingram et al., 2017).

Homelessness and Mental Health

Findings on the associations of

[Image description: Feminine-presenting young white student with Down's Syndrome, sitting outside of school alone.]

homelessness and mental health are complex. Some research suggests that mental health challenges are especially common among youth exposed to housing insecurity (e.g., Falci et al., 2011; Slesnick & Prestopnik, 2005; Whitbeck, 2009), but other research indicates there is little difference in health, learning, or behavioral needs compared to economically marginalized but stably housed youth (Lowell & Hanratty, 2022; Shinn et al., 2008). This could suggest that economic deprivation and marginalization contribute to mental health difficulties, but that homelessness itself is not uniquely detrimental over and above the myriad health harms of low socio-economic status. These mixed findings may also be partially attributable to the influence of social support for youth who rely on doubling up, which is associated with less negative outcomes than other temporary housing

arrangements (Low et al., 2017). The poorest outcomes are seen among unaccompanied minors, who presumably have the lowest levels of social support given separation from caregivers and community (Barnes et al., 2021). In addition, longer, more frequent, or cumulative exposure to housing insecurity may also be particularly detrimental to future mental health (Russell, 1995; Schteingart, 1997).

Housing insecure youth with mental health challenges also often experience comorbid physical health problems, which may be attributable to the damaging effects of stress on health in general (Barnes et al., 2021; Cutuli et al., 2017; Cutuli et al., 2010). In addition, compounded marginalization such as LGTBQ+ status, a proxy for exposure to homophobic harm, is also associated with an increased risk of mental health diagnoses among unhoused youth (Prock, 2019). Yet there also seems to be an underutilization of available mental health services (Prock & Kennedy, 2020) as well as limited receipt of, or access to, care among homeless youth (Zima et al., 1997). This highlights the importance of identity affirming, culturally responsive, trauma-informed care.

Needs and Outcomes of Homeless Students with Disabilities

In addition to aforementioned trends, students who experience both homelessness and disability are likely to have unmet educational needs, with some researchers considering this group *the most* at risk for neglect (Bowman & Popp, 2013) and consequently, poor school outcomes (Aratani, 2009; Cutuli, 2013). Youth who experience both disability and housing insecurity also have smaller and less stable social networks than their peers, suggesting

the need for targeted efforts to boost social support (Falci et al., 2011). Further, housing-insecure youth with disabilities experience more school absences and are more likely to be suspended than homeless youth without disabilities (Stone & Uretsky, 2016), suggesting systemic issues related to insufficient educational supports and potential discrimination. Under McKinney-Vento requirements, such disparities should prompt review and revision of policies and procedures to examine and prevent disparate impact on students who are racially or linguistically minoritized, LGBTQ+, or disabled (USDOE, 2016).

What Equity-centered Policy and Practice Can Support Affected Students, Families, and Communities?

Support Policy and Initiatives to Reduce Housing Insecurity

Two key contributors to housing insecurity are low socioeconomic status and housing unaffordability. Therefore, key to addressing the needs of homeless students with disabilities is eliminating its systemic causes by way of state and federal policies to increase housing affordability, housing subsidies, income support, and healthcare affordability and access. Other policy initiatives that may reduce housing insecurity are accessible supportive emergency services, violence prevention (including domestic violence prevention), and funding to reduce the costs and provider shortages for healthcare, community, and school-based services. In addition, because housing and employment discrimination also contribute to housing insecurity, more efforts to curb their effects are needed.

Ensure Timely, Appropriate Identification for Eligible Students

Timely identification is key to accessing services under homeless education and special education law. Because economic deprivation and housing insecurity can affect development, schools can provide access to developmental screenings for housing insecure youth. Where disability is suspected, expedited screening and evaluations may be warranted to facilitate timely access to supports. Conversely, during disability screenings and evaluation, housing and food insecurity should be addressed in the process of gathering information about a student's background, experiences, and needs.

Educators should not assume disability when homeless youth are observed to have academic, social, emotional, or behavioral difficulties; nor should they assume that housing insecurity explains all of an individual's challenges. Special education does not address unmet basic needs; those should also be attended to through other means such as provision or referral for food, clothing, and essentials. A comprehensive evaluation should seek to ascertain the determinants of observed difficulties and identify needs, which may be complex even when housing insecurity can be identified as one contributor. In some cases, this will result in identification of an eligible disability, resulting in development of an IEP; in other cases, only services outside of special education may be warranted. Even when IDEA eligibility is not established, eligibility under Section 504 should also be considered along with other programming or services not linked to disability to ensure students' needs are

met.

Improve Interagency and Interprofessional Communication and Collaboration

It is important that policies and practices support interagency and interprofessional communication and collaboration (Burns et al., 2021) to facilitate timely identification and effective services and supports for homeless youth, including those with disabilities. This includes all of the various state and community agencies involved in supporting housing insecure youth and families, from housing and homeless service agencies, to education and health care, to shelters and emergency services. It is also important for schools to develop and consistently implement procedures and contingencies to provide regular, ongoing screening, monitoring, referral, and follow up for housing insecurity (Rafferty, 2000; Rafferty & Holmes, 1994). This should include, for instance, screening at multiple points throughout the academic year and ensuring timely referrals, monitoring, and follow-up are provided throughout. What is more, ongoing monitoring and provision of needed referrals should happen throughout the school year, not just as a one-time contact, as circumstances and needs may change, sometimes rapidly (Ingram et al., 2017). Policies, procedures, and data systems should support rapid initiation or transfer of records to prevent delays or lapses in services, including transportation, special education, and related services, particularly within the school of origin.

Within school, interprofessional collaboration and communication should support ensuring homeless students have access to needed supplies, information,

assignments, and academic support, particularly when housing and transportation instability impede attendance or engagement and participation; providing flexibility on attendance and due dates; and navigating legal issues, including consent for enrollment and program participation for unaccompanied minors (Ingram et al., 2017).

Provide Regular, Targeted Professional Learning

[Image description: Masculine-presenting student of Color standing alone at a gate in a school yard, holding backpack.]

Communication, collaboration, and identification efforts should be supported with regular, ongoing professional learning and consultation to support staff-wide understanding of available supports and services, and potential signs of housing insecurity, so that those who interact most with students are well positioned to support timely identification of housing insecurity. Screening and data on attendance, grades, and behavior can be used to identify students who may be showing signs of

homelessness or other needs for supports (Ingram et al., 2017).

Training should also be targeted at reducing biases and stigma associated with homelessness and disability so that implicit or explicit biases do not contribute to students or families' disengagement from, or aversion to, identification for programming. Inservice preparation should also address teacher-student relationship building as authentic, trusting relationships with adults are an important protective factor for a range of outcomes and can be especially beneficial where individuals have intense, complex needs (Whitbeck, 2009; Witgil, 2019). Given research indicating many homeless students reported feeling unsupported and uncomfortable reaching out to school staff (Ingram et al., 2017), so building relational skills and creating a school culture and climate are essential. These efforts will help students feel safe to voice their struggles and seek assistance so that student homelessness does not remain imperceivable to those who could facilitate access to needed services and supports.

Cultivate a Positive, Supportive School Environment for All Learners

In addition to the individualized services homeless and disabled students are legally entitled to, high-quality prevention and intervention services are valuable to supporting their development and wellbeing. Schools can ensure an infrastructure for multi-tiered support systems (MTSS) to bolster schoolwide prevention efforts, targeted supports, and positive school climate, wellbeing and mental health, as well as to curb usage of exclusionary discipline and other ineffective or harmful educational practices. For housing insecure youth, one

relevant service is tutoring for when absences are unavoidable. Extended day services can also be helpful for housing insecure youth and families, as well as others. Implementation should ensure transparency about potential supports and services. This might include, for example, regularly featuring available programs, services, and providers in school- or class-wide communications; making them easily accessible in web-based materials; and providing information in a variety of languages. MTSS should also emphasize family partnerships (Sheridan & Garbacz, 2022) and trauma-sensitive approaches (Gherardi et al., 2020). Given that schools are likely to apply exclusionary discipline and other punitive approach to homeless youth more than their peers, it is also important that educators prioritize harm reduction, not punitive or zero-tolerance policies, particularly where attendance, truancy, and substance use are concerned (Witbeck, 2009).

Prevention and intervention supports should also feature consideration of the perceptions, experiences, and needs of marginalized youth throughout tiers of supports in identification of research based practices (Sullivan et al., 2022), including use-targeted strategies and consideration of disaggregated outcome data to allow for identification of differential access to, and effects of policies, practices, and services (Skelton et al., 2021; Sullivan et al., 2024).

Given the importance of food security and nutrition for learning (e.g., Taras, 2005), in addition to federal and state school nutrition programs, MTSS can support food security through interagency collaboration and support to access the Supplemental

Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), afterschool and child care programming, and shelters; weekend and school break food programs; and partnerships with local farmer's markets, grocers, and restaurants to provide food to students and families in need (NCHE, 2022).

[Image description: Young students of diverse ethnic backgrounds and gender expressions, posing in class, one of whom is in a wheelchair.]

More broadly, the school hub approach is a powerful means of linking to a wide array of services or supports on school grounds such as a school-based health clinic, food pantry, laundry, and youth center, based in the conceptualization of schools as a site for multisystem support (Stefanski et al., 2016). Such approaches are often grounded in understanding that inequity and marginalization are rooted in policy and structures that can be overcome through organizing schools in partnership with community-based providers to proactively, comprehensively, and systematically create access responsive to the needs of children, families, and communities (Baquedano-

López et al., 2013). Regardless of the rates of housing insecurity within a school, this approach can increase service access. But for homeless youth and families, hubbed approaches that bring together a range of education, health, and community services and supports within a school location can be invaluable for facilitating timely, efficient access to much needed services.

Conclusion

Federal laws provide legal protection and entitlements for students who are homeless or disabled. Students who experience housing insecurity and disability are at particular risk for unmet needs, and most homeless youth report inadequate school supports. Several efforts can improve access to services and resultant outcomes. These include:

- supporting policy and initiatives to reduce housing insecurity and associated discrimination and increasing access to healthcare and other supports;
- ensuring timely and appropriate identification of students' eligibility and needs for homeless education and disability programming;
- improving interagency and interprofessional collaboration and communication to improve child find;
- providing professional learning to support educators' knowledge of, and support for, housing insecure students;
- and providing comprehensive prevention and intervention services via MTSS.

With the growing prevalence of housing insecurity, particularly among families with children and racially, linguistically, and culturally minoritized and LGBTQ+ youth, it is crucial for schools to provide timely

identification and supports for wellbeing and success.

Federal Regulations and Guidance Websites

- National Center for Homeless Education - The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act: https://nche.ed.gov/legislation/mckinney-vento/
- U.S. Department of Education - Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) website: https://sites.ed.gov/idea/
- U.S. Department of Education - Disability Discrimination: Overview of the Laws: https://www.ed.gov/laws-and-policy/civil-rights-laws/disability-discrimination/disability-discrimination-overview-of-the-laws
- U.S. Department of Education - Protecting Students With Disabilities: https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/504faq.html

Recommended Resources

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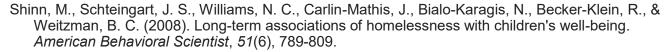
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About the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center

The mission of the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is to ensure equity in student access to and participation in high quality, research-based education by expanding states' and school systems' capacity to provide robust, effective opportunities to learn for all students, regardless of and responsive to race, sex, and national origin, and to reduce disparities in educational outcomes among and between groups. The Equity by Design briefs series is intended to provide vital background information and action steps to support educators and other equity advocates as they work to create positive educational environments for all children. For more information, visit http://www.greatlakesequity.org.

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